

Ritual Studies and Narratology: What Can They Do For Each Other

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1. INTRODUCTION

When scholars associate ritual with a form of expression, this form tends to be poetry rather than narrative (see Ryan). Baudelaire called poetry an “evocative magic” (*sorcellerie évocatoire*), and he requested for the words of the poet the rigorous exactness of the formula spoken by a magician casting a spell. Mallarmé conceived of his hermetic poetry as a secret ceremony accessible only to those who had been initiated into its mysteries. For Saint-John Perse, the purpose of poetry was to enact and celebrate a communion of mankind with cosmic forces, such as the wind, the sea and the earth. Art took a “primitivist turn” in the early twentieth century (cf. Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, or the influence of African art on Cubist painting) that encouraged Surrealist associations of literary practices with magic, divination, the occult, and tribal customs. Nowadays we are more inclined to regard poets as skilled craftsmen than as oracles inspired by a supernatural presence, but the Romantic conception of the poet as a genius and visionary was a major force in these mystical visions. The analogy between poetry and ritual rests on three major points: both ritual and poetry deal with the sacred; both are supposed to lead to an event that deeply transforms the participants; in both cases, finally, the accomplishment of this event depends on the precise observance of formal requirements – gestures in the case of ritual, language in the case of poetry. The New Critics of the

fifties believed that one could not change a single word in a poem (which meant in a literary text, for poetry was regarded as the essence of literature) without changing its entire meaning; similarly, one cannot change any element in a ritual without depriving it of its efficiency.

Most of these analogies break down in the case of narrative. Novelists are keen observers of society rather than technicians of the sacred, and narrative is much less dependent than poetry on an exact choice of words, as the popularity of translation suggests. The two genres also differ in their tolerance of repetition, which forms the essence of ritual: we may re-read a poem many times, or recite it in our mind like an incantation, and fall every time under the spell of its language, but only children want to hear the same story over and over again. Despite these differences, however, I hope to show in this chapter that the relations between ritual and narrative are sufficiently rich and numerous to make their association productive. Let me start with a definition. Taking inspiration from the French ethnographer Jean Cazeneuve, I define ritual as a performance of actions and verbal utterances that fulfills three conditions:

Ritual must obey fixed rules. These rules specify that the actions must repeat other gestures or other words. The American ethnographer Roy Rappaport formulates this condition as follows: “I take the term ‘ritual’ to denote *the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*” (Rappaport 24; italics original). Not entirely encoded by the performers means that the performance must at least to some degree conform to tradition, rather than being entirely the product of improvisation. This does not mean that rituals cannot change over the years; but as Rappaport observes, modifications, if they are to become a regular part of the ritual, rather than a unique occurrence, are typically introduced by individuals who claim to have been inspired in dreams or visions (33).

These gestures must be efficacious in a non-practical way. They must cause an event to happen through means that are symbolic rather than material. Yet the event is not merely a symbolic, but a literal transformation, and it can affect material objects. A prime example of an event that involves both the spiritual and the material is the transsubstantiation that transforms the Eucharistic host of the Catholic Mass into the body and blood of Christ.

Rituals must be part of a “religious” vision of the world – a vision that rests on a dichotomy between two kinds of phenomena: on one hand, the

visible, the everyday, the profane, on the other hand invisible forces that may be called the sacred, the numinous, or the supernatural. Ritual achieves its efficiency through a manipulation of these hidden forces; its goal is either to introduce them into daily life, or to keep them away.

If we insist on these three conditions, ritual is an endangered species. The hold of rituals on people's lives is much weaker in our increasingly secular cultures than in religious or tribal societies. But ritual behavior has not completely disappeared: think of the habit of singing the national anthem on certain occasions (for instance sports events), of the practice of hazing to be admitted in certain societies, or of the enduring celebration of Mardi Gras long after people gave up the habit of fasting before Easter. People also create private rituals, such as avoiding to step on lines on the sidewalk in order to avert bad luck. (There's a fine line between ritual and superstition.) These behaviors no longer reflect a world-view dominated by a division between the sacred and the profane, except when the sacred evolves into nationalism or belief in a certain political system. Similarly, if we want to regard as ritual the mating habits of animals, such as the dance of the fiddler crab or the display of the peacock's tail, we must regard condition 3 as optional. With the relaxation of condition 3, condition 2 is considerably weakened. If singing the national anthem leads to an "event," this event is not a physical transformation but the public testimony of belonging to a certain community. The efficiency of most, if not all, post-religious rituals lies in a psychological effect. If we allow condition 2 to be fulfilled by subjective mental events of which the participants may not be aware, this leaves only condition 1 as a hard and fast feature of ritual.

Yet not all repetitive and rule-governed behaviors qualify as ritual: for instance, games follow strict rules that confer a certain repetitiveness to the actions of the players; drama involves the oral performance of a written text that should not be substantially altered; and filing a tax report must be done annually and follows very specific regulations. How can we eliminate these activities from our definition of ritual? The case of the tax report is the easiest one to dismiss: it is not a ritual because it follows a logic of practical efficiency. Drama differs from ritual through its strict partition between performers and audience: in a ritual, the entire congregation participates in the performance. I find games the most difficult to distinguish from the secular form of rituals, and indeed many games are performed as part of a ritual, such as the Olympic Games in ancient Greece, and they have their

share of ritual elements, such as spectators singing certain chants or wearing their team's colors. The main difference between games and rituals has been pointed by Levi-Strauss: while games lead to victory and defeat, and therefore to a relation of inequality, ritual turns all participants into members of the same community, even if they came originally from different groups (Rappaport 45).

The weaker character of conditions 2 and 3, compared to condition 1, suggests that rituals form a fuzzy set tolerating various degrees of membership: according to this model, the Roman Catholic Mass, or human sacrifices in pre-Columbian civilizations achieve full ritual status because they fulfill all three conditions, and do so very strongly, while the mating dance of the fiddler crab, or the singing of the national anthem before a game of American football are marginal examples of ritual. This marginality does not mean however that they are rituals in a metaphorical way: they fulfill only one condition, but they fulfill it literally. Filing one's income tax, by contrast, can only be called a ritual in a figural way.

In recent years it has become fashionable for people to design their own weddings or funerals by writing their own vows, holding the ceremonies in unconventional places, or having their remains disposed of in a strange way: for instance, the journalist Hunter S. Thompson had his body shot through a cannon like a bullet, and the pop culture guru Timothy Leary had his ashes sent into space. These practices are expressions of individuality, and as such they are not meant to be repeated: it is their unique character that makes them important to their participants (or patient, in the case of funerals). Does this mean that condition 1 is no longer a defining feature of ritual? I will argue the opposite. If we are tempted to regard personalized weddings and funerals as rituals, it is because they signal a passage between stages of life, and such passages are almost universally marked by rituals (see van Gennep). We touch here on the difference between ceremony and ritual. It may be traditional (=ritualistic) to hold ceremonies on certain occasions, especially life transitions, but the exact form of the ceremony needs not be traditional. Ritual tolerates improvisation and variation as long they take place within a fixed frame – the frame that makes a certain event count as “wedding” or “funeral.” Vows written by the couple to be married still fulfill the conditions of being vows (i.e. binding statements of intent); and strange disposal of remains still marks the end of a life, especially when it is publicly advertised.

Given the definition proposed above, how can we connect ritual to narrative? I see several ways of doing so. Some involve metaphorical relations, based on analogy, while others involve metonymic relations of part to whole: ritual can be an element of narrative, or narrative an element of ritual. The purpose of studying these resemblances, differences, and relations of containment is not to propose an ambitious general theory of the origins of myth and ritual, but more modestly to lead to a better understanding of each of these phenomena individually.

2. METAPHORICAL RELATIONS

2.1 Universality in Human Culture

If we look at narrative and ritual from an evolutionary point of view (see Boyd), the lack of material efficiency of ritual actions makes their existence as problematic as the existence of fictional stories. The answer to the question “Why would mankind waste its time performing rituals when people could solve problems through much more efficient practical actions” is closely tied to another question asked by evolutionary psychology about narrative: “Why do people enjoy so much stories about imaginary events, when they could use their time exchanging practical information about the real world – information that would play a much more obvious role in their survival.” Despite their lack of practical efficiency, the practice of ritual and the creation of imaginary worlds through storytelling are both universal human activities and essential factors in what Roy Rappaport calls “the making of humanity.” Both rituals and narrative make us human by building community: ritual coordinates activity into a collaborative event, while narrative requires joint attention to the words of the storyteller.

Another aspect of ritual and narrative that explains their cultural importance is captured by a formula often used by psychologists and cognitive narratologists: “Narrative is a way to make sense of the world” (see Herman). We can say the very same thing about ritual, and in fact the formula seems to apply much better to ritual than to narrative, especially if we conceive of “making sense of the world” as providing a feeling of belonging to a place or to a community. Many narratives only make sense of the world if “making sense” is understood as expressing an experience of alienation, of

undergoing events that cannot be explained (think of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*). Still, if expressing existential anguish is a step toward making sense of life, one can say that both narrative and ritual represent ways of dealing with what is perhaps the most important source of anguish, namely the randomness of fate. But they do so in very different ways: ritual, by trying to eliminate this randomness from life, narrative, by turning it into a plot.

2.2 Need for Interpretation

Because the mode of operation of ritual is symbolic rather than practical, the purpose of ritual actions is not transparent to outside observers, as would be the purpose of actions with a material mode of operation. This means that rituals, like narratives, are "texts" that must be read and that provide a test for interpretive abilities.

2.3 Mode of Presentation

In its literary manifestations, narrative is a representation in the strict sense of the term: the audience imagines that the story concern events which took place independently of the act of narration. In the case of nonfictional narrative the report may or may not be accurate, and the hearer may or may not believe the story, but the very fact that she may not believe it means that she assumes the existence of an external referent. In fiction the events are produced by the discourse, but the audience pretends to believe that they have an autonomous existence. Another way to describe narration is to regard it as an act of assertion. Because what is asserted exists independently of the assertion, a distinction can be made between story – the represented events – and discourse – the act of representation. In ritual, by contrast, events are not narrated but enacted, except when the ritual includes the recitation of a myth. As a live performance, ritual is closer to drama than to verbal narrative, but according to the historian of religion Mircea Eliade it does not involve acting, which means the adoption by the performers of a foreign identity. In Eliade's account (1954), when a performer impersonates a mythical creature in the course of a ritual, he does not pretend to be somebody else for the entertainment of an audience, but rather experiences a mystical identification with this creature, and reintegrates the sacred time (*illud tempus*) during which the mythical events occurred. This account of

ritual as a kind of time machine no longer holds true for the rituals of societies that have lost a sense of the sacred; nowadays many rituals tend to be mere commemorations of past events. The participants' awareness of the ontological difference between the commemorated events and their re-enactment means that ritual is closing the gap with narrative representation. But when ritual retains its full force of manipulation of the sacred, it is not a game of make-believe, but something that happens here and now, something that happens "for real." Its mode of action is what speech act theory describes as a performative (and it is in fact no coincidence that most of the examples of performative speech act proposed by Austin and Searle are part of rituals: christening, marrying, swearing in). As a performative, ritual makes no distinction between events and representation. This means that it invalidates the narratological distinction between story and discourse.

2.4 Sequentiality

One feature that ritual and narrative have in common is sequentiality. In ritual, any tampering with the order of the actions would result in a loss of efficiency. The various parts of the ritual prepare each other and lead toward a denouement in a configuration which can be compared to the plot of a tragedy, even though the relation between the elements is not causal but largely conventional and symbolic. In narrative it is possible to tamper with chronological order on the level of discourse but not on the level of story. The events that make up a story are linked to each other by relations of causality, and these relations are fixed and unidirectional. Changing the order in which causally related events happen results in the best of cases in a different story, and in the worst cases in a logically incoherent sequence.

2.5 Eventfulness

Narrative typically consists of two types of events (see Hühn): repetitive events that describe the daily life of the characters and maintain the status quo; and unique events that introduce significant changes in the storyworld. It is the second type of events that guarantee the tellability of narrative: good stories do not concern the daily and the predictable, but the exceptional and newsworthy. When narrative reports a daily routine, for instance

how Mr. Smith got out of bed, ate breakfast and started on his way to work, it is because this sequence will be interrupted by the events in which the tellability of the story is invested. We expect that on his way to work Mr. Smith will be hit by a car, abducted by space aliens, or that he will fall in love with a woman he meets on the subway. When narrative uses repetition, it is to highlight differences: for instance in a fairy tale the first son tries and fails, the second son tries and fails, but the youngest tries and succeeds. While narrative thrives on the unique and unpredictable, ritual represents mankind's way to exorcize it from life. In contrast to narrative, ritual offers no surprise: the congregation of a Catholic mass knows that the ceremony will end with the words *missa est* (at least if the mass is sung in Latin), and the fans of a football game know that it will begin with the national anthem. The only suspense occurs with rituals of healing or of control of the weather: the patient may or may be cured of the disease, rain may or may not fall, but these events are in a sense external to the ritual since they happen afterwards. All this makes the spirit of ritual profoundly alien to the spirit of narrative. Yet eventfulness is not absent from ritual, and while they differ in their tolerance of change on the level of the global world order, ritual and narrative have strong similarities in the domain of semantic structure.

2.6 Semantic Structure

To explain the semantic structure common to narrative and ritual I will rely on the model of plot proposed by Jurij Lotman. Lotman views the world of a story as structured by a system of relations between symbolic domains delimited by spatial boundaries. This system can be represented by a map, or by a Venn diagram. In a fairy tale, for instance, there is an opposition between "home," a realm of security, the forest, an area of danger and adventure, and "the castle," symbol of power and site of rewards. Myth may rely on an opposition between "the realm of the dead" and "the realm of the living," or between the habitat of the gods and the habitat of humans. In a novel, the segmentation may correspond to social classes: in an example provided by Lotman, there could be "main street," where rich people live, the suburbs, home to the working class, and "the tenements," where outcasts and immigrants reside (Lotman 237). The oppositions that structure the storyworld need not be anchored in space: the semantic map of a story may consist of purely conceptual categories, such as "the human" vs. "the

non-human,” or “the feminine” vs. “the masculine.” Any opposition capable of being represented through a spatial diagram can form the background against which plot can be described. Lotman defines plot as the movement of an object – typically the hero – across a boundary between mutually incompatible categories. Plot, consequently, is the disruption of an established order, followed by either a new order, or the reestablishment of the old one. The narrative significance – which means, the eventfulness – of an event does not lie in its semantic definition, but in the resistance of the boundary that it violates, and in the importance of the boundary for the world order. In an example proposed by Lotman, “death” matters when it happens to the hero, and when it brings glory or shame, but not when its victims are anonymous soldiers: it is considered normal that many soldiers will die during a war (Lotman 236). Or to take another example: “marriage” becomes eventful when it takes place between people of different social classes, or between people of the same gender, but not when it respects established social rules.

This model is easy to transfer to ritual. Just as narrative divides the world into distinct symbolic domains, ritual relies on divisions in space, time, and society. The division of space operates both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal divisions single out certain places as different, as holy, such as sacred groves, sanctuaries, mountain tops, cultural houses, and menstrual huts, or they oppose public spaces to private ones. The crossing of these horizontal boundaries is experienced as a dangerous step – hence the importance in many cultures of the threshold and of the liminal, an area that belongs neither to the inside nor to the outside (see Turner) – and it is marked by rituals of purification, such as washing one’s feet. These rituals suggest that the individual who steps over a threshold must become a different person. The horizontal structuring of space reflects a vertical division based on ontological differences: it is because they allow communication between humans and the gods and therefore break the boundary between the sacred and the profane that certain sites are marked as holy places. In addition to being delimited in space, the breaking of ontological boundaries may be delimited in time. Ritual structures time by instituting daily hours of prayer, weekly days of worship, or annual events such as celebrations of the solstice or equinox, harvest feasts, carnivals, and alternations between periods of fasting and rejoicing. While rituals based on natural phenomena presuppose a cyclical conception of time which brings a regular return of

the same events, rituals that mark the different stages of human life rest on a linear conception, since these stages are irreversible. Rites of passage and of initiation follow a script that makes the crossing of temporal boundaries dependent on the crossing of spatial boundaries. In order to pass from boyhood to manhood, or to reach a higher status in a secret society, the candidate must undertake an initiatory journey consisting of three stages: separation from home; travel through a foreign territory, such as the land of the dead, where the candidate is subjected to various tests and undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth; and return home as a different person (see Vierne). These three stages form a script that fulfills Lotman's conception of narrative event as "the shifting of a persona across the border of a semantic field" (Lotman 233). Other examples of shift across boundaries in a ritual script are the transubstantiation of the Catholic mass, where the Eucharist host, a mere thing, passes from the realm of the material to the realm of the spiritual, and the ritual of the scapegoat, where the sins of a community are loaded upon an innocent victim, which is then expelled from the community, together with its load (see Girard).

Yet there is an important difference between the plots of narrative and ritual: in narrative the "eventfulness" of the narrated is valued for its own sake; it is, as I have suggested, an intrinsic source of tellability. Also, when a character or object crosses a boundary, the world order is changed; in order to restore its initial order the character must perform a second crossing of boundary, and this second crossing is a difficult task: think of the obstacles that Odysseus must overcome in order to return Ithaca to its original status. But in ritual, while the script enacts a crossing of boundary, this crossing is put in the service of the preservation of a global world order. There is no need to cross twice, to undo the event, in order to return to an original state. How can we explain this paradox of an event that both creates change and maintains the status quo?

The answer varies with the type of ritual. In the case of rites of passage, which rely on a linear conception of time, the eventfulness of the ritual affects an individual who must pass from one stage of life to another; but since every member of the community must cross the same boundary sooner or later, the change in the individual does not create changes in the community. In the case of rituals that rely on a cyclical pattern, such as the return of the seasons, the crossing of boundary marks the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. But why is it necessary to perform a ritual in

order to initiate a new cycle, if periodicity is a natural part of cosmic order? Time may not be cyclical after all, and the return of the same may not be guaranteed. If the same actions must be performed over and over again, it is because the order of the world is a fragile state in constant need of repair. By injecting the world and the community with a periodic dose of the sacred, ritual provides the nourishment necessary to maintain cosmic order. But the sacred must be held within spatial and temporal limits, for if it were allowed to spread across the entire world it would dissolve the distinctions on which order is based. This explanation may seem far-fetched for modern rituals, such as singing the national anthem or acting as a fool during carnival, but when the sense of the sacred disappears, as it tends to do in modern societies, ritual is still needed to refresh a social order which depends on the integration of the individual in a community.

3. METONYMIC RELATIONS

3.1 Representations of Ritual in Narrative

A first type of metonymic relation is illustrated by narrative fictions that make ritual part of their content. Here we can distinguish three cases.

First, stories can revolve around a ritual inspired by real world practices. An example of this situation is the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles: when the heroine disobeys the order of the king in order to give a proper burial to her brother Polynice, we can assume that she is performing an important ritual of ancient Greek society. As actions mandated by the gods, rituals belong to the domain of the obligatory; but the orders of the king create for his subjects another kind of obligation; burying Polynice is therefore an action both forbidden and obligatory. There cannot be a more striking example of dramatic conflict and of tragic situation. Another example of plot that relies on ritual comes from a totally different genre, the comic book Tintin. In *Prisoners of the Sun*, Tintin and his friends are captured by a group of descendants of the Incas who still practice human sacrifices. Our heroes are about to be sacrificed to the Sun god when Tintin, who knows that an eclipse is imminent, implores the god to veil its face in order to express his disapproval of the sacrifice. Presto, the sun is darkened, and the panicked natives free the would-be victims. Here we have a mockery of rit-

ual as the barbarous practice of a primitive culture, while in *Antigone* ritual is presented from the point of view of the culture in which it is practiced, this is to say, as a sacred duty.

Rather than referring to existing rituals, narrative may concern private rituals invented by the characters. My example is the play by Jean Genet, *The Maids*. The play revolves around two maids, Claire and Solange, who feel oppressed by their mistress and by a class system that condemns them to a lower status. Everyday they perform a script of their invention in which Claire plays Solange, Solange plays Madame, their mistress (or vice versa), and Madame is murdered, but the maids never find the courage to complete the script. At the end of the play, however, the maids find themselves in a desperate situation – they are about to be caught for lying to their mistress – and they perform the ritual one last time. But this time they go all the way: Solange offers poisoned tea to Claire, who is playing Madame. The death of Claire, which counts ritually as the death of Madame (which means that it is this death, since ritual acts are not representations but performatives), acquires the significance of a human sacrifice that frees both maids from their inferior condition: one of them is dead, and the other will be sent to jail, a fate presented as preferable to the condition of a servant.

A third way for ritual to appear on the level of narrative content is through comparison between the experience of the hero and the script of a specific kind of ritual. The investigation of such analogies is the concern of an approach to literary criticism known as the “myth and ritual” school, which flourished in the Fifties and early Sixties and whose most prominent representative is the Canadian critic Northrop Frye. Under the influence of the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung, this school reads narrative texts as manifestations of archetypal patterns found all over the world. The most widely applicable of these patterns is the scenario of the rite of passage or initiation, which has been found in texts ranging from chivalric romance to *bildungsroman* and from science-fiction to computer games (see Vierne). Another script that critics love to apply to literary works – for instance to Joyce, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence – is the cycle of the death and rebirth of nature, a cycle that forms the basis of many rituals around the world (Doty, chapter 6).

Ritual may also form the subject matter of non-fictional discourse, more particularly of ethnography. While this discourse is descriptive rather than narrative – it concerns repetitive habits rather than singular world-

transforming events –, it can still be subjected to the methods of inquiry developed by narratology. Since description is an integral part of narrative, narratology has developed many concepts which can also be applied to globally descriptive texts. Ethnographic accounts of ritual could be studied in terms of such criteria as role of the observer, spatial point of view, use of omniscience, use of embedded discourse such as testimonies from the participants, and above all ideological stance.

3.2 Narrative Foundations of Ritual

While narrative can make ritual part of its content, in an inverse metonymic relation it is narrative that forms the content of ritual. Many rituals around the world involve a representation of events which are also narrated by a myth; the recitation of this myth may be an integral part of the ritual, or the participants in the ritual may impersonate the heroes of the myth in a dramatic enactment. In the late 19th century, the often observed connection between ritual and narrative inspired a school of thought known as the “myth and ritual” theory. This theory, first proposed by William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), then endorsed by Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), regards ritual as primary; people first performed rituals, and then justified their behavior by creating myths that recounted how the ritual had been given to mankind by supernatural creatures. For the proponents of this theory, the original ritual was a ceremony that marked the death and rebirth of nature at the end of the year and guaranteed the production of crops for the coming season. These practices, which supposedly involved putting a king to death, gave birth to myths telling of gods being dismembered and resurrected, of fertility goddesses spending part of the year in the underworld, and of supernatural beings giving crops to people and telling them how to practice agriculture. According to this theory, all of human culture can be derived from the foundational rite of renewal of the cosmos. Later scholars (for instance Mircea Eliade) turned the theory around, claiming that rituals are the enactment of myths. Critics of the theory, such as Clyde Kluckhohn, point out that certain cultures have a rich mythological tradition but relatively few rituals (the example is ancient Greece), while others, like ancient Rome, have lots of rituals but relatively few myths. (This may explain why the Romans had to borrow their mythology from Greece.) It may be ultimately impossible to verify a theory that presents a single, general answer to the

chicken and egg question of whether ritual precedes myth or vice-versa, but the fact remains that myth and rituals present two complementary aspects of religious life: through myth, religion is defined as something that one believes, through ritual, as something that one practices. We don't need a grandiose unified theory of the origins of myth and ritual to study the multiple ways in which these two fundamental aspects of human culture interact with each other.

3.2.1 From Ritual to Narrative

As an example of narrative developed out of ritual, consider the modern legend of Santa Claus bringing presents to children on Christmas Day. The custom of Christmas gift-giving is a holdover of the so-called "gift economies" that preceded the advent of modern market economies. While in a market economy goods are exchanged for money, in a gift economy they are given for free, though the recipient may be placed under a social obligation to reciprocate. The pagan ritual of gift-giving became integrated into the Christmas celebration through association with the presents of gold, myrrh and incense brought to Jesus by the three wise men. In stories developed in many European countries, the donor was identified as a supernatural creature, such as the Christ Child (who went from recipient to donor), Father Frost, Père Noël, or St Nicholas, who became Santa Claus. The presents, rather than being an expression of pure generosity, soon became a way to control the behavior of children: while good children received toys, bad ones received coal, sticks (for their parents to spank them), or nothing at all. As the commercial dimension of Christmas began to overshadow its religious meaning, the story became more and more fleshed out, since it encourages consumerism: parents have to maintain the belief in Santa that they have implanted in their children, and the only way to maintain this belief is by purchasing toys. (The abbreviation to Santa shows that associations with St Nicholas have been largely forgotten.) Every child in the United States knows that Santa comes down the chimney, lives at the North Pole, where he manufactures the toys with the help of Mrs. Claus, and travels in a sleigh pulled by a dozen reindeer. One of these reindeer, a certain Rudolf, had been the butt of jokes because of his red nose, but when Santa chose him to lead the sleigh, the unsightly facial feature served as the guiding light for the whole expedition. I will spare my readers the summary of

the countless spin-offs created every year by Hollywood just in time for Christmas. But it is worth noting that as ritual gave birth to stories, the stories, in turn, generated their own rituals, such as placing cookies and milk for Santa on the fireplace mantle, hanging stockings above the hearth to be filled with presents, or having children (and nowadays even pets) photographed with Santa at the shopping mall.

The reverse situation – ritual growing out of narrative – will form the topic of a more detailed case study.

4. FROM NARRATIVE TO RITUAL: THE ESCALADE IN GENEVA

My example of narrative giving birth to ritual – a situation more frequent than ritual giving birth to narrative – is a celebration in the Swiss city of Geneva (until 1815 an independent Republic) that encapsulates for the citizens the identity of their city. This celebration is called *l'Escalade*, and it commemorates events which happened on the Winter Solstice of 1602, according to the Gregorian calendar; but since in 1602 Geneva still used the Julian calendar, the celebration takes place on December 11 and 12, a date that conveniently keeps it separate from Christmas. The Escalade differs from rituals based on pure myth through the historical nature of its foundational narrative. While rituals based on myth involve two layers, the story and the ritual, the Escalade presents three distinct layers: the historical events, the stories told about them, and the commemorative events.

4.1 The Events

According to the most reliable historical sources – such as the report of Sunday, December 12, 1602, in the Register of the City Council – the events unfolded as follows.

On December 11, 1602, the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel, chose the longest night of the year to launch a surprise attack on the Protestant city-state of Geneva, hoping to reclaim it for Catholicism and to expand his sphere of influence north of the Alps. His army consisted of about 300 mercenaries from Italy and Spain who were to conquer the city, with an additional 1,000 troops who were to occupy it. They marched silently on a

moonless night to the gates of the city. There they set up ladders against the city walls and climbed inside the town (hence the name *l'Escalade*), but the first invaders stumbled upon a watchman who fired a gun and woke up the sleeping city. The citizens jumped out of bed, seized weapons, and managed to repel the invasion. A woman who was cooking soup for her husband, who worked a night shift, grabbed her cast iron pot and threw it on the head of an enemy soldier, instantly killing him. Another woman was so scared by the noise that she pushed a huge piece of furniture against the door to block it; the next day it took several strong men to remove the improvised barricade. 17 Genevans and 54 enemies were killed; 13 were taken prisoners and hung the next morning, in a blatant violation of the Geneva conventions (which of course did not exist at the time).

4.2 The Story

These basic events were soon celebrated in oral and written narratives that lie halfway between history and legend: they recount actual events, but they elevate these events to heroic status and they embellish them with many apocryphal details. The citizens of Geneva like to think of the Escalade as a major event in the history of modern Europe, but there is little or no mention of it in history books, except of course for those books that concern the history of Geneva. Had the attack succeeded, it is probable that the King of France, Henri IV, would not have tolerated the annexation of Geneva by his rival the Duke of Savoy. The Protestant Swiss cantons also had a vested interest in the freedom of the city. Nevertheless, the local narrative tradition builds the failed attack into an event with decisive consequences, not just for Geneva, but for the future of enlightened and progressive mankind (represented by the political and religious institutions of Geneva).

A song about the Escalade was penned around 1603 by an unknown author who must have been a direct witness. This song, known as *Cé Qué Laino* (the one who is up there), is written in a franco-provençal dialect as incomprehensible to speakers of standard French as Swiss German dialects are to speakers of High German. It consists of 64 strophes, 30 of which recount in grisly detail the execution of the prisoners. The failure of their Catholic prayers to the Virgin Mary to save them from the gallows is noted with rather sadistic pleasure. The text also describes executions that did not take place through a colorful counterfactual narrative devoted to the un-

pleasant fate that awaited the pastors of Geneva if the enemy had won: they would have been paraded through Rome in a triumph reminiscent of the customs of ancient Rome, a prelude to their being burned at the stake. The first three and the last strophe of *Cé Qué Laino*, which give credit to the Almighty for the victory, have become something like the national anthem of Geneva, and they are sung on several official occasions beside the Escalade, including the swearing in of the City Council. Because *Cé Qué Laino* is written in a dialect that few people understand, and because most people know only four of its strophes, the “official” version of the Escalade comes from a 19th century song, *La Belle Escalade*, which is sung to the tune of *La Carmagnole*, the song of the French revolution of 1789, and is it widely distributed in the form of illustrated posters. Most children have it memorized. For the 400th anniversary of the Escalade in 2002 a comic-book version of the story, *Sauvez Genève*, appeared; this version tries to counter the political incorrectness of *Cé Qué Laino* by promoting tolerance of diversity. The story tells about a young Catholic boy who happens to be in Geneva on the night of the attack and fights bravely to save the city. In this version Geneva is not the Protestant Rome that it long prided itself to be, but a breeding ground of religious fanaticism.

For a narratologist, it is easy to see why the story of the Escalade has become something like a national epic of Geneva. The tale combines the excitement and tellability of fictional narrative with the informational appeal of stories based on historical facts. Its tellability lies in its simple dichotomy of “us” – the good guys, Genevans, representatives of religious freedom and political self-determination – versus “them,” the bad guys, Catholicism, the Pope, mercenaries, oppression by foreign powers. It is also rich in comic episodes; for instance when the troops returned to the castle and the Duke of Savoy greeted his defeated commander, he used a scatological expression that delights schoolchildren: “Vous m’avez fait la une belle cacade.” The story leads to the most satisfactory of denouements: the victory of the underdog over a much more powerful opponent (hints of David and Goliath), and it offers a valuable moral captured by the proverb “Aides-toi, le ciel t’aidera” (“God helps those who help themselves”). For the schoolteachers of Geneva, the story of the Escalade is a golden source of *edutainment*: it teaches about life in the old days and about the history of the city, it has its share of female heroines, and it presents a vivid spectacle to the imagination. It is used not only in history classes, but also in art pro-

jects (children are asked to illustrate it), in composition classes (children re-tell it from various perspectives), and in music education (through the teaching of the numerous songs inspired by the events).

4.3 The Ritual

According to tradition, the day after the Escalade – which was a Sunday – Théodore de Bèze, the successor of Calvin, led the population of Geneva to the Cathedral for a religious service, during which the congregation sang Psalm 124 of David, a Psalm that thanks God for liberating Israel from its enemies. Psalm 124 has become known as the Psalm of the Escalade, and it is sung every December 12 in a commemorative service at the Cathedral.

In the following years the commemoration of the Escalade quickly took the form of a carnival, a development which met with strong disapproval from the religious authorities. In Calvinist Geneva all religious celebrations had been banned, not just the celebrations linked to Catholic Saints, but also Christmas and Easter. The festivities of the Escalade provided a much needed occasion for rejoicing and merriment. Even the rather dour Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who spent most of his life in exile, made it a point to get together with other Genevans in Paris for the Escalade and to drink a couple of bottles of wine, for as he wrote, the Escalade should be celebrated with wine, not with milk (Genève, Département de l'Instruction Publique 17).

To this day two tendencies can be observed: an austere, patriotic, religious commemoration reminiscent of Thanksgiving in the U.S., and a wild, noisy, unbridled celebration reminiscent of Halloween. The spirit of Thanksgiving is maintained by the Company of 1602, a rather exclusive society consisting mainly of members of the Geneva aristocracy, who are the descendents of Huguenots and other refugees from the wars of religion. The company of 1602 parades across the Old Town of Geneva, dressed in historical costumes, and stops in various places to read the list of the 17 people who gave their life to defend the city. The pageant ends in front of the cathedral with a bonfire and the singing of *Cé Qué Laino*. It is all very orderly and respectful of the Calvinist heritage of the city. The spirit of Halloween and of the carnivalesque, on the other hand, manifests itself in the habit of holding costume parties. Originally people dressed as Savoyards, which means as peasants with a blue blouse, a red neck scarf and a straw hat.

(This costume reflects a misidentification of the enemy, for the soldiers of the Duke were not peasants from Savoy but foreign mercenaries from Italy and Spain. In fact the people from neighboring Savoy were rather on the side of Geneva.) Nowadays we see a full range of costumes, especially scary ones inspired by Halloween. The highlight of Escalade parties is the breaking of a chocolate pot filled with marzipan vegetables in memory of the heroic feat of Mère Royaume, the woman who killed an enemy soldier with a pot of soup. This is done by the oldest and youngest people in attendance, and they must recite the traditional formula: “Ainsi périssent les ennemis de la République” (“So may perish the enemies of the Republic”). Children wearing costumes go from door to door, singing *Cé Qué Laino* and *La Belle Escalade*, and this being Switzerland, they are rewarded with money instead of candy. A more recent tradition is a foot-race that starts from the castle where the Savoyard army began its march, and ends in the old town. Everybody can participate in the foot-race, and all kinds of costumes are welcome, in contrast to the historical pageant, in which only members of the Company of 1602 can march. (In fact the Company was not too happy about the race, and they insisted on having it take place a week before their own show.)

Despite its religious façade, the Escalade has all the markings of a secular, modern-day ritual that fulfills only condition 1. As a commemoration of historical events, the celebration does not involve any existentially significant crossing of boundaries. Its time is linear, not cyclical: *pace* Mircea Eliade, the celebrants do not believe in an eternal return that transports them every December 12 into *illud tempus*, the sacred time of the foundation of a community by mythical creatures. Participants seek entertainment, not purification, spiritual renewal, or access to a higher status, and they do not act out of civil duty, since there is no obligation to attend the festivities. Does it mean that the Escalade is pure hedonistic gratification? We should remember that in the early 17th century it served the covert purpose of making the religious world order of Calvinist theocracy more bearable through a temporary suspension of rules similar to what takes place during the carnival in Catholic countries. Nowadays opportunities for entertainment have become so numerous that they no longer need a ritual justification. But insofar as it brings to its voluntary participants pride in their city, a sense of identity, and integration in a community, the fun of the Escalade still fulfills the fundamentally social function of ritual.

4.4 The Ritualization of the Story

The transformation of the story – or stories – of the Escalade into a public celebration rests on several operations:

Selection. Rather than reenacting the story in its totality, the ritual makes a choice of particularly “performable” elements. (Performability is to ritual what tellability is to narrative.) The celebration commemorates the killing of a soldier with a pot of soup, the death of 17 citizens, and more recently, with the staging of the foot-race, the march of the Savoyards from a nearby castle; but it leaves out the deed of the woman who pushed a heavy dresser against her door, the hanging of the prisoners (an episode that people would rather forget), or the climbing of the walls with ladders.

Transformation. The death of the defenders is not represented through simulated action but read as a list. The soup pot is no longer a metal container but, as one would expect in Switzerland, a chocolate confection. (The Escalade is used by the local chocolatiers as an opportunity to flaunt their skills.) In the original story the pot breaks the head of a soldier, but in the reenactment it is the pot that gets broken.

Expansion. There is a tendency to add new events every year. For instance, the smashing of the chocolate pot by the youngest and oldest member of the company is not part of the original story but an added symbol: the youngest and oldest stand for everybody whose age falls within the limits they embody – in other words, for the entire population of the Geneva. A more recent addition is the foot-race, which dates back to the seventies, when physical fitness, and particularly running became a fad. But introducing new elements is contrary to the spirit of ritual. As the Escalade expands into a popular feast, it tends to become a nondescript festival similar to the fairs and carnivals of other cities, and to lose sight of what makes it a unique expression of Genevan identity.

Blending of multiple stories and rituals. The narrative background of the Escalade weaves together internal and external stories. The internal stories include all the versions of the historical events, from the report found in the archives of the city to the songs and fictions that turn the facts into legend.

The most important of the external narratives is the story told in Psalm 124, which can be regarded as embedded within the internal narrative, since the singing of the psalm is something that the citizens of Geneva reportedly did on December 12, 1602. Its relation to the internal narrative is a matter of analogy between Israel and Geneva, both beneficiaries of divine protection. Since the Escalade took place on the longest night of the year, the festivities allude very indirectly to the myth of death and rebirth of the Winter Solstice, and the little marzipan vegetables in the chocolate pots suggest the widespread tradition of celebration of the harvest. But the richest source of external narratives resides in the costumes of the participants. Almost all costumes tell a story. When people dress as peasants from Savoy the reference is internal, but when they dress as Batman, Superman, Pirates of the Caribbean, cowboys and indians, Disney princesses, angels and witches, they bring in the full narrative spectrum of modern popular culture.

If we take “narrative” in a rather broad sense that makes it synonymous with “interpretation,” or “explanation,” we can say that the Escalade combines the external narratives of Thanksgiving and of Halloween. These two narratives present Genevan identity in sharply different ways: while the Thanksgiving type of commemoration equates Geneva with the chosen people of Israel and implicitly defines Genevan identity in opposition to foreigners and Catholics (even though Catholics are now in majority), the carnivalesque spirit of Halloween embraces the cultural diversity of present-day Geneva, a city that takes pride in its international institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article I have outlined three ways in which the fields of narratology and ritual studies can enrich each other:

Comparison of narrative and ritual. This approach is based on the assumption that even though ritual and narrative are distinct phenomena, we will gain a better understanding of each of them taken individually through the study of their similarities and differences.

Contribution of ritual studies to narrative. Drawing on state-of-the-art conceptions of ritual should lead to better informed interpretations of narrative when ritual is part of its content – either through direct mention,

structural similarity, archetypal patterns, or invention by the characters of private rituals.

Contribution of narratology – or perhaps, more generally, of the concept of narrative – to ritual studies. This field of investigation focuses on the feed-back loop that connects narrative and ritual: how ritual is narrated; how ritual gives birth to stories; and conversely how narrative becomes ritual. The excavation of the rich narrative underground in which ritual grows its roots seems to me the most promising avenue for a collaboration of narrative and ritual studies.

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